Mom invents Eli the Bi-Polar Bear for her son

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By ELIZABETH SIMPSON, The Virginian-Pilot
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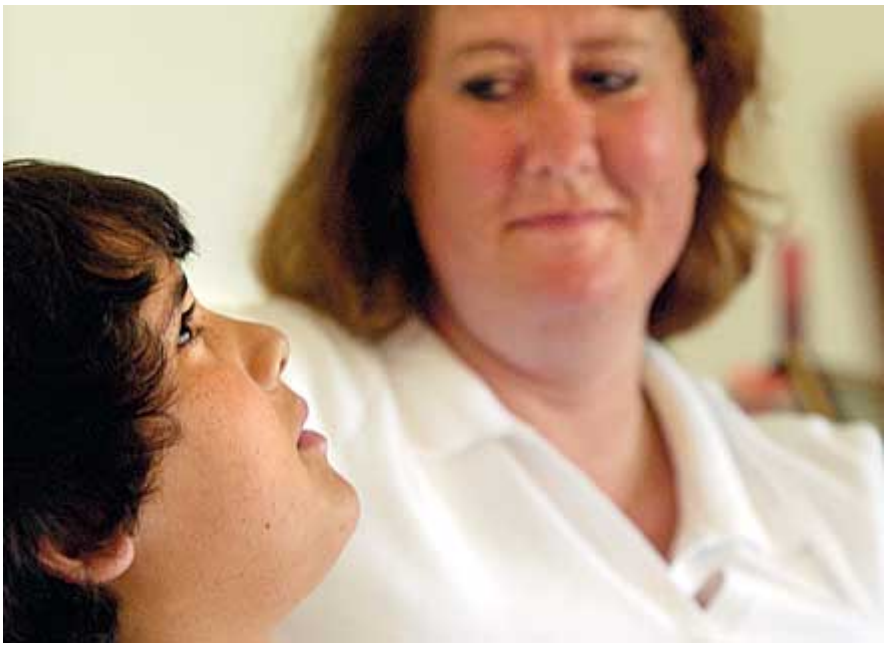

Twelve-year-old Eli Liddle, here with his mother, Sharon, was diagnosed with bipolar disorder when he was 7. bill tiernan/the virginian-pilot.

ELI LIDDLE has deep brown eyes that dance with giddy liveliness.

Those same eyes can flame into rage.

And settle into dark pools of hollow despair.

“It can happen really fast,” the 12-year-old Norfolk boy says. “I can go through everything in an hour.”

It has been six years since he was first diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a mental condition of radical mood swings. That’s six years of wrestling down emotions, wrecking rooms, upending friendships.

But also six years of figuring out how to describe what’s going on inside his adolescent self.

“I took every emotion to the extreme. That was me. If I thought something was funny, I’d laugh for 10 minutes. Everyone else would have a little chuckle, and I’d keep laughing and enjoying myself.”

Eli can describe the flip side too: When other people get disappointed, they just get angry, and then they get over it, he says.

“When I get mad, I break something. I break it to where it’s unfixable. When I hurt someone’s feelings, I couldn’t just apologize like other people do. It was always worse than that.”

Those extremes led his mother, Sharon Liddle, to take him to a psychiatrist, whose diagnosis posed another quandary: How do you explain bipolar disorder to a 7-year-old?

Sharon’s search for a simply worded book came up empty, so she wrote one.

That’s how Eli the Bi-Polar Bear was born. The rambunctious polar bear cub in a book of the same name got angrier and happier and sadder than all the other bears.

Momma bear did everything she could to make him happy, but Eli was not a happy bear. He was an angry, very unhappy little polar bear.

Former baby sitter Rebecka Garvin drew illustrations of a bear who looks uncannily like Eli.

“It was really funny to me, because it was my life,” says Eli, who turns 13 later this month.

Is it his bipolar condition, or normal boy-on-the-cusp-of-teenhood hubris, that makes him think he’s now on the brink of fame? He tempers that with a more humble hope:that his story will help other kids, “ … ’cause I’m pretty sure there’s more than one person that has bipolar.”

He’s right about that.

There was a time when it was believed only adults were stricken with bipolar disorder, once known as manic depression. But in the past decade or so, research has shown the disorder shows up in children as well. More doctors are diagnosing it; more parents are aware enough to have their children checked.

Dr. Frank Kirchner, an associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral science at Eastern Virginia Medical School, says because it’s a relatively new diagnosis for children, doctors have only a short track record to review for patterns of progression in children and treatments that prove most effective over time.

They don’t know whether a child diagnosed will always go on to have the disorder as an adult. They really don’t know what the impact of early diagnosis and treatment will be.

“We hope we’re making a difference,” says Kirchner, who treats a couple of children with bipolar disorder a week. Few medications have been tested on children, so doctors prescribe what has worked in adults, in what’s called “off label” use.

Some children respond

to treatment – medication such as mood stabilizers, therapy to teach them coping skills. Others are more resistant.

Just making the diagnosis is difficult. It’s often confused with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or depression. The way Kirchner describes the difference between an attention deficit and bipolar disorder to parents is that the first is like a butterfly flitting from flower to flower where the latter is more like a bowling ball hitting pins.

There’s an explosive quality.

That was Eli, both the boy and the bear.

First, the bear.

The other polar bears noticed that sometimes Eli would be really wild and excited. Sometimes he was so excited that he would laugh and giggle uncontrollably. Eli did not pay attention or listen very well when he was in this mood. It was hard to calm him down when he was so wild …

And when he was really angry and irritable, he would throw things or start a fight. Eli had a temper!

Now the boy.

Eli's anger surfaced when he was a toddler. Once he got so mad, he picked up a wine glass, crunched it with his teeth and spit out the glass. As he grew older, bouts of silliness joined the lineup. His brother, Joshua, who is now 15, remembers how Eli would make a funny noise, like a popping sound, or see something funny on TV, and repeat it over and over again, and laugh uproariously. Everyone would tire of it in a few minutes, but Eli kept going.

"We'd have to beat up on him, he'd annoy people so much," Joshua says.

If he scored a goal at a soccer game, he'd smile all day long about it, then brag about it, claiming he was better than any of his friends or brothers. If the team lost, he'd be angry all day long, sometimes longer. He'd think the rest of the team blamed him.

Joshua would say something conciliatory, like "Good game," and Eli would hit him. He'd go into Joshua's room, rip down posters, turn everything upside down.

"It looked like a tornado hit it," Joshua remembers.

Then Eli would close himself in his room the rest of the day.

Once Eli got mad at his younger brother, Thomas, now 10, and picked up a framed picture of him, smashed the glass, then scratched the photo. Another time, Eli threw a chair at his brothers. Those episodes were usually followed by spells of remorse and talk about killing himself. His grandmother says he'd go to the kitchen to look for knives.

For a while, his outbursts were mostly at home, but soon they happened at school, too. He'd pick out a classmate's tenderest vulnerability and make fun of it. He'd snap pencils into pieces and throw them across the room. Sometimes, he'd feel so despondent he'd cry in class.

One of his teachers at Christ the King School in Norfolk, Becky Barrett, says he once came to her with distant,

hollowlike eyes, and said,

"I have to go home or I'm going to get in trouble."

In the book, Eli the Bi-Polar Bear's mother took him to see "The Old Bear," a wise old bespectacled bear who sits behind a wooden desk with a note pad and talks with the cub.

He said that sometimes, when bear cubs are born, certain parts of the brain don't work well together. And if the parts are not working together like they should, a little polar bear might have confusing changes in mood …

Eli didn't want to be different.

So, the Old Bear gave Eli a bucket of special, tasty little fish he could eat every morning with breakfast. The Old Bear said the tasty fish would make Eli's big mood changes go away.

He also said that if Eli remembered to eat the fish every single morning and visit him once a week to talk about how things were going, he would feel better soon.

For the record, Eli would like to note that he did not eat buckets of tasty little fish. But he did go to his share of psychologists and psychiatrists for a couple of years.

Sharon and her husband, John, like many parents, were concerned about putting Eli on medication. After two more years of outbursts, broken friendships and disrupted classes, Sharon found an organic supplement that contains lithium. Eli began taking it when he was 9.

Kirchner, who is not involved in Eli's treatment, says it's not uncommon for parents worried about medications to turn to supplements. But that approach carries risks. Supplements are not strictly regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and can differ from one manufacturer to another – and even batch to batch. And while most prescription medications have not been tested on children, they have been on adults. Supplements garner far less scrutiny and study.

Eli thinks the pills have helped, at least some of the time.

“I don’t freak out as much,” he says.

He also feels he has gained maturity in handling his moods. The book helped him be more open. One of his teachers said the book even helped other students at the school understand the condition, making them more considerate.

“It’s not like some big mystery,” Barrett said. “He doesn’t keep it secret.”

Eli the polar cub gets better after his sessions with The Old Bear.

He laughed when everyone else laughed. He didn’t get angry or throw things like he used to, and he didn’t get wild and out of control any more … Momma and Pappa bear noticed that he made more friends than ever before.

And so Eli the boy lived happily ever after, too, right?

Well, not so fast.

“I still get angry but not as bad,” says Eli. “ I still do some of the things. I get sad. I consider killing myself.”

But he believes he is doing better.

“I have come a long ways from smashing things, breaking things, having people mad at me. Now my grades are coming up … sort of.”

A friend of Sharon’s who has a teenage son with bipolar disorder asked Sharon when she was going to write a sequel: “Eli becomes a teenager and refuses to take his medication.”

That’s a common complaint among the parents of teens with bipolar. Kathrin Hartmann, a clinical psychologist and associate professor at EVMS, said the teen years can be particularly hard. Teens like the elation the manic side of their condition gives them. But that’s usually followed by an emotional crash.

Their body chemistry is also changing, and that means adjustments in medication.

Eli experimented with skipping his pills for two weeks in spring.

“The medicine doesn’t work all the time, so then I don’t feel like taking it.”

That was followed by a breakdown in school and two days at home.

Does Eli think he will be as open about having bipolar disorder as he enters his teen years?

“I hope not.”

Why not?

“Because I think people who are older are more mature, they don’t make fun like kids my age do. They’re more sophisticated. They’re not childish.”

The story of Eli the Bi-Polar Bear doesn’t end with the final page of the book.

Sharon paid to have the book published into a colorful hardback in 2003. Soon Eli’s friends and neighbors and classmates wanted books written about them, too.

So Sharon wrote “Kasey the Stressed-Out Silver Dolphin” about a boy down the street with test anxiety. She also wrote a book about a wombat who was adopted from another country, an account appreciated by her 15-year-old daughter, Kate, whom the family recently adopted from Ukraine. Another writer, Jennifer Avis, joined the effort and wrote a story about a zebra with asthma.

Sharon formed a company called Dysfunction Junction with a board of advis ers to review the books. This year,

a small Norfolk-based company called Vida Entertainment agreed to publish the books about bipolar disorder and asthma, with a launch

date planned for 2006. Ray Horowitz, president of the company, says he believes they’ll be helpful to children “who frequently feel very isolated.”

Eli likes the fact that his furry alter ego led to other stories and other kids talking about ways they’re different. He again mentions that terrific idea of becoming famous over the whole affair. He dials that down a notch, saying he hopes the books will help others, because, “More people being helped is good for the whole world.”

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